

The Human Being in Black Theology

Although Christian theology is essentially God-talk, we must not forget who it is that speaks of God. Human finiteness means that we cannot transcend human existence even when we speak of the transcendent God. We know who God is, not because we can move beyond our finiteness but because the transcendent God has become immanent in our history, transforming human events into divine events of liberation. It is the *divine* involvement in historical events of liberation that makes theology God-centered; but because God participates in the historical liberation of humanity, we can speak of God only in relationship to human history. In this sense, theology is anthropology.

In order to clarify the black perspective on theological anthropology, it will be useful to compare it with certain examples of American theology and of existential philosophy.

American Theology, Existentialism, and Black Theology

The weakness of most “Christian” approaches to anthropology stems from a preoccupation with (and distortion of) the God-problem, leaving concrete, oppressed human beings unrecognized and degraded. This is evident, for instance, in fundamentalist and orthodox theologies when they view the infallibility of the Bible as the sole ground of religious authority and fail to ask about the relevance of the inerrancy of scripture to the wretched of the earth. If the basic truth of the gospel is that the Bible is the infallible word of God, then it is inevitable that more emphasis will be placed upon “true” propositions about God than upon God as active in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. Blacks, struggling for survival, are not interested in abstract truth, “infallible” or otherwise. Truth is concrete.

The same God-emphasis is evident among American Barthians, who talk about the absolute sovereignty of God in self-revelation, but say nothing about God’s self-revelation to blacks who are forced to live in rat-infested ghettos. These theologians are silent on the real human issues.

It may be interesting in a seminary class to talk about God’s self-disclosure and how this view of revelation renders the traditional proofs of God’s existence invalid. But most blacks have never heard of Aristotle, Anselm, Descartes, or Kant, and they do not care about the interrelationship of theology and philosophy. Unless God’s revelation is related to black liberation, blacks must reject it. The Barthians have confused God-talk with white-talk, and thus have failed to see that there is no real speech about God except in relationship to the liberation of the oppressed.

Unfortunately, liberal theologians have been guilty of the same error. Though they may have stressed God’s love and neighborly love in human relations, it was done with a white emphasis. They stressed God’s love at the expense of black liberation, failing to articulate the right of blacks to defend themselves against white racists. They asked blacks to turn the other cheek (so they could be “like” Jesus) when whites were destroying them.

It is true that some liberals “helped” blacks by persuading whites to be nice to them, and this probably prevented some lynchings. But blacks know that a person can be lynched in other ways than by hanging from a tree. What about depriving blacks of their humanity by suggesting that white humanity is humanity as God intended it to be? What about the liberal emphasis on human goodness at the same time whites were doing everything they could to destroy blacks?

It is disappointing, though perhaps understandable, that the death-of-God theology and secular theologies follow the same pattern. They ask us to embrace humanity and its urban manifestation, but fail miserably in relating this “new humanism” to the inhumanity committed against blacks. “God is dead,” they tell us, but blacks are not impressed: they know that this is a white attempt to make life meaningful for whites in spite of their brutality to the black community.

Because black theology begins with the black condition as the fundamental datum of human experience, we cannot gloss over the significance and the concreteness of human oppression in the world in which blacks are condemned to live. In its concern for concreteness, black theology resembles existentialism, with its conviction that “existence precedes essence” (to use Sartre’s phrase). This means that the concrete human being must be the point of departure of any phenomenological analysis of human existence. According to Sartre, there is no essence or universal humanity independent of persons in the concreteness of their involvement in the world. All persons define their own essence by participating in the world, making decisions that involve themselves and others.

Sartre’s emphasis on human concreteness and the awesome responsibility of making decisions that include others has led him to deny the reality of God. To speak of human freedom necessarily means the exclusion not only of God but also of every appeal to a common human nature. Sartre’s humanism excludes God and universals because they enslave human beings and deprive them of the possibilities inherent in the future.¹

Unlike Sartre, Camus (who refused to refer to himself as an existentialist) appeals to a common value among human beings, a value capable of recognition by all and responsible for revolt against human oppression. The affirmation of a common value

accounts for Camus' popularity among religionists. He appears to leave open the question of God. That, however, was not his intention: like Sartre, he denies the relevance of God to human existence. The experience of the absurd as disclosed in the reality of human suffering cannot be reconciled with belief in an omnipotent God.²

Black theology, though declining to enter the debate on human nature between Camus and Sartre, concurs in the intensity with which they focus on oppressed human beings. And although we see no need to deny the existence of God, we are glad for the presence of Camus and Sartre to remind theologians that the God-problem must never be permitted to detract from the concern for real human beings. The sole purpose of God in black theology is to illuminate the black condition so that blacks can see that their liberation is the manifestation of God's activity.

We believe, then, that we can learn more about God, and therefore about human nature, by studying blacks as they get ready to "do their thing" than by reading some erudite discourse on human nature by a white theologian. God in Jesus meets us in the situation of our oppressed condition and tells us not only who *God* is and what *God* is doing about our liberation, but also who *we* are and what *we* must do about white racism. If blacks can take christology seriously, then it follows that the meaning of our anthropology is also found in and through our oppressed condition, as we do what we have to about the presence of white racism.

Some readers will object to the absence of the "universal note" in the foregoing assertions, asking, "How can you reconcile the lack of universalism regarding human nature with a universal God?" The first reply is to deny that there is a "universal God" in the normal understanding of the term. As pointed out in the previous chapter, God is black.

Secondly, black theology is suspicious of those who appeal to a universal, ideal humanity. Oppressors are ardent lovers of humanity. They can love all persons in general, even black persons, because intellectually they can put blacks in the category called Humanity. With this perspective they can participate in civil rights and help blacks purely on the premise that they are part of a universal category. But when it comes to dealing with particular blacks, statistics transformed into black encounter, they are at a loss. They remind us of Dostoevski's doctor, who said, "I love humanity, but I wonder at myself. The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular."³

The basic mistake of our white opponents is their failure to see that God did not become a universal human being but an oppressed

Jew, thereby disclosing to us that both human nature and divine nature are inseparable from oppression and liberation. To know who the human person *is* is to focus on the Oppressed One and what he does for an oppressed community as it liberates itself from slavery.

Jesus is not a human being for all persons; he is a human being for oppressed persons, whose identity is made known in and through their liberation. Therefore our definition of the human being must be limited to what it means to be liberated from human oppression. Any other approach fails to recognize the reality of suffering in an inhuman society.

Black theology cannot affirm a higher harmony of the universe which sidesteps the suffering of blacks. We are reminded of Dostoevski's Ivan Karamazov and his rejection of God because of the suffering of children:

I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to "dear kind God!"

To experience the sufferings of little children is to reject the universal human being in favor of particular human beings. It forces you to say something that takes seriously the meaning of human suffering. Whites can move beyond particular human beings to the universal human being because they have not experienced the reality of *color*. This is the meaning of Maulana Ron Karenga's comment:

Man is only man in a philosophy class or a biology lab. In the world he is African, Asian or South American. He is a Chinese making a cultural revolution, or an Afro-American with soul. He lives by bread and butter, enjoys red beans and rice, or watermelon and ice cream.⁴

The inability of American theology to define human nature in the light of the Oppressed One and of particular oppressed peoples stems from its identity with the structures of white power. The human person in American theology is George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln rolled into one and polished up a bit. It is a colorless person, capable of "accepting" blacks as sisters and brothers, which means that it does not mind the blacks living next door *if they* behave themselves.

It is at this very point that American theology ceases to speak of the human person in any real sense. Actually, only the oppressed know what human personhood is because they have encountered both the depravity of human behavior from oppressors and the healing powers revealed in the Oppressed One. Having experienced the brutality of human pride, they will speak less of human goodness; but also having encountered the meaning of liberation, they can and must speak of human worth as revealed in the black community itself affirming its blackness.

I have defined my point of departure as the manifestation of the Oppressed One as he is involved in the liberation of an oppressed community. It is now appropriate to ask, "What is the human person?" That is, what is it that makes human beings what they are, thereby distinguishing them essentially from everything else that exists?⁵

The question about the human person is not answered by enumerating a list of properties; a person is not a collection of properties that can be scientifically analyzed. Rather, to speak of the human being is to speak about its

being-in-the-world-of-human-oppression. With the reality of human suffering as our starting point, what can black theology say about human nature?

The Human Being as Endowed with Freedom

1. *Freedom as Liberation.* If the content of the gospel is liberation, human existence must be explained as “being in freedom,” which means rebellion against every form of slavery, the suppression of everything creative. “A slave,” writes LeRoi Jones, “cannot be a man.”⁶ To be human is to be free, and to be free is to be human. The liberated, the free, are the ones who define the meaning of their being in terms of the oppressed of the land by participating in their liberation, fighting against everything that opposes integral humanity. Only the oppressed are truly free!

This is the paradox of human existence. *Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free.* How can this be? On the one hand, the concreteness of human existence reveals that human beings are not (fully) human when their creativity is enslaved by alien powers. To be (fully) human is to be separated from everything that is evil, everything that is against the “extension of the limits of humanity.”⁷ But on the other hand, human existence also discloses that the reality of evil is an ever-present possibility in our finite world, and to be (fully) human means to be identified with those who are enslaved as they fight against human evil. Being human means being against evil by joining sides with those who are the victims of evil. Quite literally, it means becoming oppressed with the oppressed, making their cause one’s own cause by involving oneself in the liberation struggle. *No one is free until all are free.*

Paul Tillich expresses this paradox in his analysis of the relationship between being and nonbeing. On the one hand, being is the opposite of nonbeing. To *be* is to participate in Being, which is the source of everything that is. To exist is to exist in freedom—that is, stand out from nonbeing and *be*.⁸ But, on the other hand, finite being “does not stand completely out of non-being.”⁹ Always present is the threat of nothingness, the possibility of ceasing to be.

The human person, therefore, is a creature who seeks to be in spite of nonbeing. The power to be in spite of nonbeing is what Tillich calls courage:

The courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with essential self-affirmation.¹⁰

Inherent in freedom is the recognition that there is something wrong with society, and those who are free will not be content until all members of society are treated as persons. There comes a time in life when persons realize that the world is not as they dreamt, and they have to make a choice: submit or risk all.¹¹ Being free means that the only real choice is risking all. Those who are prepared to risk all when they perceive the true nature of society and what it means to the oppressed are the only ones who are truly free. Those who come to this recognition also realize, as does Ignazio Silone’s Pietro Spina in *Bread and Wine*, that freedom must be *taken*:

Freedom is not something you get as a present.... You can live in a dictatorship and be free—on one condition: that you fight the dictatorship. The man who thinks with his own mind and keeps it uncorrupted is free. The man who fights for what he thinks is right is free. But you can live in the most democratic country on earth, and if you’re lazy, obtuse or servile within yourself, you’re not free. Even without any violent coercion, you’re a slave. You can’t beg your freedom from someone. You have to seize it—everyone as much as he can.¹²

It is not difficult for the oppressed to understand the meaning of freedom. They are forced by the very nature of their condition to interpret their existence in the world contrary to the value-structures of an oppressive society. For the oppressed, to be is to be in revolt against the forces that impede the creation of the new person.

This is what Karl Marx had in mind in his definition of the human being as praxis, which means “directed activity.”¹³ Praxis expresses human freedom. “Freedom,” writes Marx, “is the essence of man.”¹⁴ It “*is not something outside one who freely is, it is the specific mode or structure of being,*”¹⁵ and inherent in it is action. Marx says: “The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice [praxis].”¹⁶ He elaborates on the inseparable relationship of freedom and liberative activity. To be (fully) human is to be involved, participating in societal structures for human liberation.

As Petrovi puts it:

*The question of the essence of freedom, like the question of the essence of man, is not only a question. It is at once participation in production of freedom. It is an activity through which freedom frees itself.*¹⁷

Freedom, then, is not an abstract question. It deals with human existence in a world of societal enslavement. We cannot solve the question of freedom in a college classroom, theoretically debating the idea of “freedom versus determinism.” Freedom is an existential reality. It is not a matter of rational thought but of human confrontation. It is not solved by academic discussion but by risky human encounter. As Silone’s Spina says, “Man doesn’t really exist unless he’s fighting against his own limits.”¹⁸

To be free means that human beings are not an object, and they will not let others treat them as an “it.” They refuse to let

limits be put on their being. They are at once a part of nature (subject to laws of the universe) and are independent of nature. Dostoevski makes this point in his *Notes from the Underground*: “Great Heavens, what are the laws of nature to me! ... Obviously I cannot pierce this wall with my forehead ... but neither will I reconcile myself to it just because it is a stone wall.” Or again, he writes: “The whole human enterprise consists exclusively in man proving to himself every moment that he is man and not a cog.” Those who insist on treating human beings as cogs must be made to realize that the human being is not a robot but is a free, living organism, capable of making the most of human creativity. Liberation is nothing but putting into practice the reality of human freedom.

2. *Freedom and the Image of God.* The being of the human person as freedom is expressed in the Bible in terms of the image of God. Even though there has been much talk about the *imago Dei* in the history of theology, most religionists have not given proper attention to the concept of existential freedom and its relationship to the image of God. Theologians seem to have a way of making simple ideas obscure by spending their energies debating fine points. (It is little wonder that nonprofessionals think that theology is unrelated to ordinary human involvement in the world.)

In the history of theology, the image of God is generally conceived of in terms of *rationality* and *freedom*.¹⁹ Justin’s statement is representative of the patristic period:

In the beginning He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God; for they have been born rational and contemplative.²⁰

It is significant that freedom and rational reflection go hand in hand, without any connection to the rebellion of the oppressed. Medieval thought was similarly defective, as the image was interpreted in terms of an *analogia entis*, which means that the being of the human person as such is in the likeness of the being of God.

The Reformation reinterpreted the image to include the personal encounter between God and the human person, and deemphasized the capacity of reason to know God. Luther even speaks of reason as a “whore” that deceives persons by causing a creature to think that it is God. To say that humankind was created in the image of God meant, for Luther, that “man was in a relation to God that was wholly based on and governed by God’s grace, to which man responded with faith.”²¹ It was a relationship analogous to a child’s relationship to its father. Just as the child responds to its father in obedience and trust, the image of God responds to God with trustful obedience.

Commenting on Luther’s view of the original righteousness of human nature (image of God), P. S. Watson says:

It was a state in which his whole life was so centered in God, that in thought, will and action he was governed solely by the good and gracious will of God. It was as if he had “no will of his own,” no desire but to do the will of God, whose word of command and promise he implicitly believed. That was what constituted man’s “original righteousness”—the right relationship to God, and therefore to all else, for which and in which he was created.²²

It is to Luther’s credit that he added the personal dimension in contrast to the rationalistic approach of medieval theology. But it is to his discredit that he failed to relate this concept to the social and political conditions of the oppressed. Luther’s identification with the structures of power weakened his view of the image of God. The idea of freedom to challenge the state with force when it resorts to oppression is not present in his thinking.

Modern theology, following Schleiermacher’s unhappy clue to the relationship of theology and anthropology, forgot about Luther’s emphasis on human depravity and proceeded once again to make appeals to human goodness. The nineteenth century is known for its confidence in the rational person, who not only knew what was right but was capable of responding to it. The image of God in human nature was the guarantee that the world was moving in a desirable direction. It never occurred to these “Christian” thinkers that they had missed some contrary evidence: this was the period of black enslavement and Amerindian extermination, as well as European colonial conquests in Africa and Asia.

World War I did much to shatter this ungodly view of human nature. Karl Barth with his *Epistle to the Romans* commentary, Rudolf Bultmann with his existential, form-critical approach, Paul Tillich with his ontology, Emil Brunner with his own brand of neo-orthodoxy, and Reinhold Niebuhr with his ethical orientation made such an impact on liberalism that we are likely never to see it again the way it used to be. These thinkers did not share the liberalist confidence in human nature; like the reformers, they emphasized human depravity, the inability of the creature to transcend finite existence. The image of God in human nature was not to be identified with abstract rationality or freedom. Although all the so-called neo-orthodox theologians had unique approaches to the idea of the image, they all agreed that it involved the whole person in a divine-human encounter.

Refuting the Thomistic concept of an *analogia entis*, Bonhoeffer says:

There is no analogy between God and man, if only because God—the only One existing in and for himself in his underived being, yet at the same time existing for his creatures, binding and giving his freedom to man—must not be thought of as being alone; in-as-much as he is the God who in Christ bears witness to his “being for man.”²³

Bonhoeffer prefers to speak of an *analogia relationis*, which is neither a part of human nature, nor a structure of its being, nor a capacity. It is a given relationship in which human beings are free to be for God because God is free for them in Christ.

The analogy, the likeness must be understood strictly as follows: the likeness has its likeness *only* from the original. It always refers us only to the original, and is “like” only in this way. *Analogia relationis* is therefore the relation given by

God... The relation of creature with creature is a God-given relation because it exists in freedom and freedom originates from God.²⁴

Black theology can appreciate the new emphasis, but it is not enough to identify the image with *analogia relationis*, as Bonhoeffer himself apparently realized later when Hitler's pretensions to deity became evident. If the image of God includes freedom, as is definitely implied in the divine-human encounter, then it must also include *liberation*.

Even though Karl Barth was opposed to them, the liberals were right in their stress on freedom as an essential element of the *imago Dei*, though they had the wrong idea of freedom. Freedom is not a rational decision about possible alternatives; it is a participation of the whole person in the liberation struggle. The Barthians were correct on the personal aspect of freedom in the divine-human encounter, but they failed to place due emphasis on the role of liberation in an oppressive society.

The biblical concept of image means that human beings are created in such a way that they cannot obey oppressive laws and still be human. To be human is to be in the image of God—that is, to be creative: revolting against everything that is opposed to humanity. Therefore, whatever we say about sin and the human inability to know God because of the fall, it must not in any way diminish the human freedom to revolt against oppression. As Gerhard von Rad says:

The Priestly account of man's creation ... speaks less of the nature of God's image than of its purpose. There is less said about the gift itself than about the task ... [that task is] domination in the world, especially over the animals.²⁵

In view of the exodus we must also say that the task includes participation in the freedom of God in the liberation of God's people. Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way:

Jahweh is ... the God who leads his people out of the house of bondage. Thus he is a God of freedom, the God ahead of us. One acquires social, political, and world-surpassing freedom from God, not against him.²⁶

It is the biblical concept of the image of God that makes black rebellion in America human. When black persons affirm their freedom in God, they must say no to white racists. By saying no, they say yes to God and their blackness, affirming at the same time the inhumanity of the white neighbor who insists on playing God. Black theology emphasizes the right of blacks to be black and by so doing to participate in the image of God.

The image of God refers to the way in which God intends human beings to live in the world. The image of God is thus more than rationality, more than what so-called neo-orthodox theologians call divine-human encounter. In a world in which persons are oppressed, the image is human nature in rebellion against the structures of oppression. It is humanity involved in the liberation struggle against the forces of inhumanity.

3. *Freedom as Identification with an Oppressed Community*. It is important to point out that freedom is not white middle-class individualism. It has nothing to do with reading and writing poetry or joining Students for a Democratic Society. It is not to be equated with Hippies or Yippies—the long hair and all that jazz.

This is not intended as a put-down of white young persons who are moving against their elders for one of the first times in American history; and I must say that they do appear to be quite human at times. The positive value of these "unusual" manifestations is their seeming recognition that there is something wrong with carrying on a war in Vietnam and with oppression generally—contrary to the long-standing assumptions of this society. The beginning of freedom is the perception that oppressors are the evil ones, and that we must do something about it.

But truly free adults take one more step. They also recognize that freedom becomes a reality when they throw in their lot with an oppressed community by joining with it in its cause, accepting whatever is necessary in order to be identified with the victims of evil.

The problem for many white groups is that of becoming truly identified with the black community. Like their elders, they seem to expect blacks to accept them without too much emotional feeling about the past. When blacks reject them, they quickly turn in on themselves, forming their own esoteric little groups, saying, "Blacks want in and we are trying to get out."

To be free is to participate with those who are victims of oppression. Persons are free when they belong to a free community seeking to emancipate itself from oppression. Freedom, then, is more than just making decisions in the light of one's individual taste during moments of excitement. It always involves making decisions within the context of a community of persons who share similar goals and are seeking the same liberation. Freedom means taking sides in a crisis situation, when a society is divided into oppressed and oppressors. In this situation we are not permitted the luxury of being on neither side by making a decision that only involves the self. Our decision affects the whole of society, and it cannot but be made in view of either oppressed or oppressors. There is no way to transcend this alternative.

The truly free are identified with the humiliated because they know that their own being is involved in the degradation of their brothers and sisters. They cannot stand to see them stripped of their humanity. This is so not because of pity or sympathy, but because their own existence is being limited by another's slavery. They do not need to ask whether their fellow human being is at fault. All they know is that there is a fight going on, and they must choose sides, without any assurance of who is right in the "Christian" sense of future victory.

Mathieu, the protagonist in Sartre's *The Age of Reason*, recognized the difficulty of being truly free by renouncing a false freedom. Thinking to himself during his encounter with Brunet, who was trying to persuade him to join the communist party, he says:

“At this moment, at this very moment, there are men firing point-blank at one another in the suburbs of Madrid, there are Austrian Jews agonizing in concentration camps, there are Chinese burning under the ruins of Nanking, and here I am, in perfect health, I feel quite free, in a quarter of an hour I shall take my hat and go for a walk in the Luxembourg.” He turned towards Brunet and looked at him with bitterness. “I am one of the *irresponsibles*,” he thought.²⁷

Freedom is something more than intellectual articulation of an existential philosophical attitude. It involves the commitment of one’s whole being for the cause of the oppressed. That is why Brunet says:

“You’re all the same, you intellectuals: everything is cracking and collapsing, the guns are on the point of going off, and you stand there calmly claiming the right to be convinced. If only you could see yourselves with my eyes, you would understand that time presses.”²⁸

But that is just the point: oppressors never see themselves as the oppressed see them. Brunet is wasting his time. If persons always have to be *told* about the inhumanity around them, there is little hope for them. Even Mathieu knows intellectually that Brunet is right and that he ought to make a choice. At one moment he says to himself regarding Brunet: “He is freer than I: he is in harmony with himself and with the party.”²⁹

In order to be free, a person must be able to make choices that are not dependent on an oppressive system. Mathieu is able to live an irresponsible life that some might call “freedom” because he participates in a society that protects him. He is insensitive to the suffering of others, even that of his own mistress, Marcelle. If he cannot choose a freedom that involves his intimate friend, it is not likely that he will be able to choose a freedom that involves unknown sufferers. As Sartre says: “The only way of helping the enslaved out there is to take sides with those who are here.”

It seems that this is the major weakness of whites who say that they are concerned about humanity. With all due respect to white concern for the war in Vietnam, the authenticity of their response must be questioned. The destruction of black humanity began long before the Vietnam war and few whites got upset about it. It is therefore appropriate to ask, “Is it because white boys are dying in the war that whites get so upset? Can we expect them to be equally involved in the destruction of their racism when the war is over? In view of their lack of concern for the oppression of blacks before and during the ungodly massacre of Vietnam, is it likely that whites will turn their energies toward the oppressed in America?” In light of the past attitudes of whites, we could expect that after the war was over and the troops withdrawn, white America would be free to deal with the “black problem” the same way it always deals with any problem: tell blacks what is required for them to exist, for their presence, and then proceed to destroy everyone who thinks otherwise.

It is an interesting miscarriage of logic that white religionists can get so perturbed about the Vietnam war but are not particularly concerned about blacks. In regard to the oppression of blacks, they can always make excuses and even suggest that black suffering is not too severe. The only way I can understand this logic is to see it for what it is—the logic of oppressors. Being white, it is only natural that their taste for humanity will arouse their sensitivities when they watch white boys leave for a war and come back in boxes. No one likes to see any member of *their own community* destroyed.

The whiteness of whites enhances their protest against wars in other parts of the world, but it only increases their own determination to keep blacks down. Being white excludes them from the black community and thus whatever concern they have for blacks will invariably work against black freedom. What whites fail to recognize is the fact that all decisions made with regard to what is important or worthwhile are made in the context of participation in a community. It is in the community that values are chosen, because the community provides the structure in which our being as persons is realized. It is not possible to transcend the community; it frames our being because being is always *being in relation to others*.

Is it possible to change communities? To change communities involves a change of *being*. It is a radical movement, a radical reorientation of one’s existence in the world. Christianity calls this experience conversion.

Certainly if whites expect to be able to say anything relevant to the self-determination of the black community, it will be necessary for them to destroy their whiteness by becoming members of an oppressed community. Whites will be free only when they become new persons—when their white being has passed away and they are created anew in black being. When this happens, they are no longer white but free, and thus capable of making decisions about the destiny of the black community.

4. *Freedom and Suffering*. Because being free means participating in the liberation of an oppressed community, freedom is inevitably associated with suffering. Socially and existentially free persons will count their losses.

To assert one’s freedom always involves encountering the economic and social structures of oppression. When rulers first perceive dissent—a threat to “their” society—their initial response is to try to silence the dissenters by cutting off the sources of physical existence and social involvement. This is to remind the rebels who is boss. Oppressors hope that by making it difficult to live, rebels will come around to seeing the world as oppressors see it.

Coupled with economic oppression is social ostracism. The intention is to demonstrate the perversity of rebel involvement by picturing them as destroyers of “the good.” At no time are the rebels given the opportunity to define their way of looking at the world, because the mass media belong to the oppressors who will not permit the seditious presence to extend itself.

If economic and social oppression fail to bring the rebels into line, the structures of power begin to devise political means of silencing them. Rebels expect this because they know that liberation always involves fighting against the powers that be. To go against the “keepers of peace” is to take a political risk, the risk of being shot, imprisoned, or exiled. That is why Silone’s Spina says, “Freedom is not something you get as a present.... You can’t beg your freedom from someone. You have to seize it—everyone as much as he can.”

Reinhold Niebuhr makes this point convincingly in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, observing that those in power will never admit that society rewards them far out of proportion to the services they render; and this attitude inevitably makes them enslave all who question their interests. Appeals to reason and religion do not change the balance of power, because both are used to defend the interests of oppressors. Change will take place, according to Niebuhr, when the enslaved recognize that power must be met with power. The black community is aware of this; and the black revolution is nothing but a will to spread the decision among blacks to seize their freedom—any way they can. No black person will ever be good enough in the eyes of whites to *merit* equality. Therefore, if blacks are to have freedom, they must *take* it, by any means necessary. For we now know as even Sartre's Mathieu recognized: "No one can be a man who has not discovered something for which he is prepared to die."³⁰

Without minimizing the horror of social, economic, and political losses, it may at least be noted that these are expected by the oppressed, and that one's life can be adjusted to accommodate physical pain. It is not possible to be black and not know what white people do to black people. The presence of the black ghettos in every city where blacks live is a visible manifestation of white cruelty. But existential suffering is not easily recognized or readily dealt with. It refers to the pain associated with the absurdity of being black in a white racist world and with the responsibility of doing something about it.

Growing up in America is an absurd experience for blacks. At first, they do not know what is going on. They cannot figure out what they have done to merit the treatment accorded them. But then they realize that white brutality is not related to their particular actions. It is white society's way of telling blacks that they are not persons. Now they must make a decision: either accept their place or resolve to call down upon themselves white indignation by revolting against the world as it is.

It is important to note that the absurdity arises not from black persons' perceptions of themselves, but only from the attempt to reconcile their being with the white world. It is analogous to Albert Camus's philosophical analysis of absurdity. The absurd is the "strangeness of the world" when the wronged try to make sense out of it in relation to their existence. The absurd, writes Camus, is "the confrontation of this irrational and wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart."³¹ There is suffering because there is no *hope* that reconciliation will be possible, and the only authentic response is to face the reality of the absurdity in rebellion.

In another context, Sartre describes freedom in terms of anguish, forlornness, and despair. The three together point to the suffering which is inseparable from being-in-the-world. Anguish is the recognition that one's actions involve all humanity. "Man is anguish," writes Sartre, in that we are creatures capable of involvement, realizing that it is not possible to accept responsibility for all and not have some anxiety about it. We are thrown into the world with a multiplicity of possibilities but with no guide for correctness in choice. But whatever choice we make, it is not simply a choice for us; it is a choice for all human beings. We assume the responsibility for humanity and declare what we consider to be humanly possible. Who can make such a choice without feeling at the same time a deep sense of anxiety? This is the choice that blacks make. They are alone and yet not alone, and there is no way to evade the seriousness of their responsibility.

Forlornness, writes Sartre, means that "God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this."³² The purpose is to deny "values in heaven" or an "*a priori* good." It is taking Dostoevski seriously, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible." We know that that is our situation, "and as a result man is forlorn, because neither within him nor without does he find anything to cling to."³³ We have no universal ethic to guide our existence in the world, and thus we are condemned to make our choices without any assurances. We choose our existence.

Sartre's analysis of forlornness is especially appropriate for the oppressed. Oppression means that society has defined truth in terms of human slavery; and liberation means the denial of that truth. The God of society must be destroyed so that the oppressed can define existence in accordance with their liberation. In the moment of liberation, there are no universal truths; there is only the truth of liberation itself, which the oppressed themselves define in the struggle for freedom. To be forlorn is to accept the task of choosing humanity without any certainty beyond the existing moment.

It is not possible to experience oppression without also experiencing despair. Despair means that "we shall confine ourselves to reckoning only with what depends upon our will, or on the ensemble of probabilities which make our action possible."³⁴ We cannot move beyond our earthly possibilities. Again in Sartre's words:

I am left in the realm of possibility; but possibilities are to be reckoned with only to the point where my action comports with the ensemble of these possibilities and no further.³⁵

It is illegitimate to point to the *future* unless the pointing includes the recognition that "I am my future." To avoid this dimension of existence is to move to a false security. It is necessary for the oppressed to carve out the meaning of existence without appealing to alien values.

The relationship between freedom and suffering is also evident in the biblical tradition. The election of Israel is a call to share in Yahweh's liberation. It is not a position of privilege but of terrible responsibility. To be Yahweh's people, Israel must be willing to fight against everything that is against this liberation. Therefore, the whole of its history is a description of the movement of this people in relation to God's liberating work. This involves suffering because liberation means a confrontation between evil and the will of the God who directs history.

The life of Jesus also discloses that freedom is bound up with suffering. It is not possible to be for him and not realize that one has chosen an existence in suffering. "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you ... falsely on my account" (Matthew 5:11). The very character of human existence as defined in his life is enough to show that we cannot be for Jesus and for the societal humiliation of human beings. To be for him means being for the oppressed, as expressed in their

self-determination. Jesus himself expresses this by limiting the kingdom of God to the poor and unwanted. The kingdom is for the poor because they represent the meaning of oppression and the certainty of liberation. Moltmann puts it well:

If we believe the crucified Christ to be the representative of God on earth, we see the glory of God no longer in the crowns of the mighty but in the face of the man who was executed on the gallows. What the authorities intended to be the greatest humiliation—namely the cross—is thus transformed into the highest dignity. It follows that the freedom of God comes to earth not through crowns—that is to say, through the struggle for power—but through love and solidarity with the powerless.³⁶

Christians can never be content as long as their sisters and brothers are enslaved. They must suffer with them, knowing that freedom for Jesus Christ is always freedom for the oppressed. Christian freedom has its beginning “in the midst of all the misery of this world,” and we “can only demonstrate this freedom by using our own freedom for the actual liberation of man from his real misery.”³⁷

5. *Freedom and Blackness*. What does freedom mean when we relate it to contemporary America? Because blackness is at once the symbol of oppression and of the certainty of liberation, freedom means an affirmation of blackness. To be free is to be black—that is, identified with the victims of humiliation in human society and a participant in the liberation of oppressed humanity. The free person in America is the one who does not tolerate whiteness but fights against it, knowing that it is the source of human misery. The free person is the black person living in an alien world but refusing to behave according to its expectations.

Being free in America means accepting blackness as the only possible way of existing in the world. It means defining one’s identity by the marks of oppression. It means rejecting white proposals for peace and reconciliation, saying, “All we know is, we must have justice, not next week but this minute.”

Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Denmark Vesey are examples of free persons. They realized that freedom and death were inseparable. The mythic value of their existence for the black community is incalculable, because they represent the personification of the possibility of *being* in the midst of *nonbeing*—the ability to be black in the presence of whiteness. Through them we know that freedom is what happens to blacks when they decide that whiteness has gone too far and that it is incumbent upon them as the victims of humiliation to do something about the encroachment of whiteness. Freedom is the black movement of a people getting ready to liberate itself, knowing that it cannot *be* unless its oppressors *cease to be*.

When blackness is equated with *freedom as a symbol* both of oppression and of the human potential, whites feel left out of things. “What about the oppression of whites?” they ask. “Is it not true that the enslaver also enslaves himself which makes him a member of the community of the oppressed?” There is a danger inherent in these questions. If white intellectuals, religionists, and assorted liberals can convince themselves that the white condition is analogous to the black condition, then there is no reason to respond to the demands of the black community. “After all, we are all oppressed,” they say, rationalizing with a single stroke the whole white way of life. By equating their own condition with the condition of the black ghetto, they are able to sleep at night, assuring themselves that we are all in the same boat.

Black theology rejects this technique as the work of the white Christ whose basic purpose is to soothe the guilt feelings of white overlords. Inherent in the recognition of the oppressed condition is the rebellion against it with all one’s might. To know oppression is to refuse to put up with it. This is why black oppression and liberation are a manifestation of the revelation of God. To be oppressed means that one is enslaved against one’s will by alien forces; and liberation means that one is willing to pay the cost of freedom— including death. Now we put the question to our white suburbanites: “What power is keeping you out there? Is it not true that the so-called oppression of which you speak is freely accepted because you are unwilling to pay the price of real freedom?”

The basic difference between black oppression and so-called white oppression is the fact that the latter is voluntarily chosen and the former is forced upon the black community. Whites can leave their ghetto whenever they please, but blacks are confined against their will. Black suffering is not by choice but is a result of the evil of white racists, who believe that they have the first, last, and only word on how the world ought to be run.

This is not to deny that whites are enslaved. What we deny is their ability to know and analyze their slavery. The depravity of oppressors is their enslavement to their own “freedom.” Because they are free to do what they will to the oppressed, the only check being their pious feelings about the world, it is not possible for them to see the oppressed as human beings. The oppressed become objects to be used to make the world more amenable to the whims of the masters. Thus oppressors are enslaved and dehumanized by their own will to power. They storm the citadel of the gods, claiming sole authority to declare what is real and right, and to shape the world accordingly. If they are to be liberated from such megalomania, it must be done by the oppressed. When the oppressed affirm their freedom by refusing to behave according to the masters’ rules, they not only liberate themselves from oppression, but they also liberate oppressors from enslavement to their illusions.

The basic error of white comments about their own oppression is the assumption that they *know* the nature of their enslavement. This cannot be so, because if they really knew, they would liberate themselves by joining the revolution of the black community. They would destroy themselves and be born again as beautiful black persons.

The Human Being as a Fallen Creature

Human fallenness is expressed in the Bible as sin. Sin is a theological concept that describes separation from the source of being. Instead of affirming their identity in the source of being, sinners reject it and attempt to be what they are not. Sin is thus a definition of being in relation to nonbeing; it is a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe.

1. *Sin as a Community Concept.* In order to understand clearly the function of sin in the biblical tradition, it is necessary to point out that it is meaningful only in the context of the Israelite community. Sin is not an abstract idea that defines ethical behavior for all and sundry. Rather it is a religious concept that defines the human condition as separated from the essence of the community. To be in sin has nothing to do with disobeying laws that are alien to the community's existence. Quite the contrary, failure to destroy the powers that seek to enforce alien laws on the community is to be in a state of sin. It is incumbent on all members of the community to define their existence according to the community's essence and to defend the community against that which seeks to destroy it.

To be in sin, then, is to deny the values that make the community what it is. It is living according to one's private interests and not according to the goals of the community. It is believing that one can live independently of the source that is responsible for the community's existence.

For Israel sin meant alienation from the covenant of Yahweh as grounded in Yahweh's liberating activity at the exodus. If the meaning of Israel's existence is defined by the exodus and the covenant, then all other ways of living in the world must be termed a violation of its existence as the people of Yahweh. Sin in the community of Israel is nothing but a refusal to acknowledge the significance of the exodus and the covenant as God's liberating activity. It means grounding one's being on some loyalty other than to Yahweh. It is counting Yahweh's activity as secondary by refusing to define the community in terms of divine liberation.

It is human existence in community that defines the meaning of sin. To be in sin means to deny the community. Nor does this definition of sin ignore the biblical claim that the fall describes the condition of *all* human beings. Indeed that is the very point: Genesis 3 is *Israel's* analysis of universal sin and thus is comprehensible only from its perspective. It is not likely that other communities, defining their being from other sources, will take too seriously Israel's condemnation of them as sinners. Genesis 3 is meaningful to those who participate in Israel's community and to no one else.

It is important to point out that Genesis 3 was probably written during the reign of Solomon, more than three centuries after the exodus. Casting his eye back across that time span, the writer sees the history of Israel as the history of alienation from the source of its being, the exodus and Sinai events. This historical and existential alienation is then projected onto a cosmic and universal screen in Genesis 3. Because Israel has not directed its existence exclusively according to divine liberation, it is separated from God and is in a condition of fallenness.

At the exodus, Yahweh appears as the God of oppressed Israel in its liberation from the Egyptians. The covenant at Sinai is the agreement between Yahweh and this people that Yahweh would continue a liberative presence if Israel would define its existence as a community on the basis of divine liberation. Sin, then, is the failure of Israel to recognize the liberating work of God. It is believing that liberation is not the definition of being in the world. When Israel tries to define its existence according to the pattern of other nations and thus believes that its existence is dependent on some source other than Yahweh's liberating activity, it is in a state of sin. To revolt against the community's reason for being is to deny the reality of the community itself.

The idea of sin is applicable to other people as they are related to the community of Israel. Because Israel believes that Yahweh is Lord of all history, those who fail to define their existence accordingly are separated from God. To fail to recognize God's activity as defined by the community of Israel is to exist in sin.

The relationship between sin and community is further evident in the character of Israelite prophecy. A prophet is one who speaks for Yahweh by reminding the community of its reason for being in the world. Nathan rebukes David because he acted for self and not for the community. Elijah challenges Ahab because he fails to recognize the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh. Amos and Hosea also remind Israel of the meaning of its existence by pointing back to the exodus and covenant. The essence of their concern is to call the community back to the source of its life. They are saying that unless we *become* what we *are*, we will no longer be. Sin is living a lie— that is, trying to be what we are not. To be is to know that one's being is grounded in God's liberating activity.

The same perspective is also found in the New Testament. Because Jesus, the Oppressed One, reveals to us what we are as God created us to be, the oppressed Christian community knows that as we actually *are*, we are fallen creatures. We are not what we ought to be. When we look at Jesus, then, we know that instead of affirming our existence in him, we have denied him and taken a course completely alien to our being.

Sin, then, is a condition of human existence in which we deny the essence of God's liberating activity as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a way of life in which we cease to be fully human and we make choices according to our private interests, identifying the ultimate with an alien power. It is accepting slavery as a condition of human existence by denying the freedom grounded in God's activity. Sin is an alienation from the source of humanity in the world, resulting in human oppression and misery.

2. *Sin and the Black and White Communities.* What does sin mean for the black and white communities in contemporary America? Because sin is a concept that is meaningful only for an oppressed community as it reflects upon its liberation, it is not possible to make a universal analysis that is meaningful for both black and white persons. Black theology believes that the true nature of sin is perceived only in the moment of oppression and liberation. This means that blacks, like Israel of old, know what

sin is because they have experienced the source of their being and are now able to analyze their own existence in relation to the world at large. They know what nonbeing (sin) is because they have experienced being (black power). We are now in a position to say what the world ought to be in relation to what it is.

Because sin is inseparable from revelation, and because revelation is an event that takes place in the moment of liberation from oppression, there can be no knowledge of the sinful condition except in the movement of an oppressed community claiming its freedom. This means that whites, despite their self-proclaimed religiousness, are rendered incapable of making valid judgments on the character of sin. That is why American theology discusses sin in the abstract, debating it in relation to universal humankind. In white theology, sin is a theoretical idea, not a concrete reality. No white theologian has been able to relate sin to the black-white encounter in America.

Generally, white fundamentalists have identified sin with moral impurity. More sophisticated liberal and neo-orthodox thinkers have spoken in hushed solemnity about our broken relationship with God—but that is all they say. We are still waiting for an interpretation of sin in relation to the world at large. Invariably, white theologians analyze sin as if blacks and whites represent one community. On the one hand, Billy Graham and his cohorts are saying that the trouble with the world is that humankind needs God; we need to turn from our wicked ways. The wicked ways, of course, refer to the failure to live according to the rules of white society. On the other hand, other whites are saying that the problem stems from a broken relation with God—a far more serious analysis than Graham's simplistic one. But we are still waiting for the meaning of this, as blacks get ready for revolution. We wait in vain because oppressors do not wish to know what is wrong with the world. Only the oppressed know what is wrong, because they are both the victims of evil and the recipients of God's liberating activity.

What, then, does sin mean for whites from the black perspective? The sin of whites is the definition of their existence in terms of whiteness. It is accepting the condition that is responsible for Amerindian reservations, black concentration camps, and the rape of Vietnam. It is believing in the American way of life as defined by its history.

Most whites, some despite involvement in protests, do believe in "freedom in democracy," and they fight to make the ideals of the Constitution an empirical reality for all. It seems that they believe that, if we just work hard enough at it, this country can be what it ought to be. But it never dawns on these do-gooders that what is wrong with America is not its failure to make the Constitution a reality for all, but rather its belief that persons can affirm whiteness and humanity at the same time. This country was founded for whites and everything that has happened in it has emerged from the white perspective. The Constitution is white, the Emancipation Proclamation is white, the government is white, business is white, the unions are white. What we need is the destruction of whiteness, which is the source of human misery in the world.

Whites, *because* they are white, fail to perceive this as the nature of sin. It is characteristic of sin that it permeates the whole of one's being, distorting one's humanity, leaving the sinner incapable of reversing the condition or indeed of truly recognizing it. If something is to be done, action must come from another source. Christianity believes that the answer to the human condition is found in the event of Jesus Christ who meets us in our wretched condition and transforms our nonbeing into being for God. If that is true, then black confrontation with white racism is Jesus Christ meeting whites, providing them with the possibility of reconciliation.

Sin warps a person's existence in the world. This is what happens when a people believes that it is God's chosen people because of its privileges in the world. It is the condition that causes ministers to compromise with slavery and to make *excuses* for white brutality against blacks. Sin is the condition that produces lynchings. It makes white theologians define the theological enterprise as the "safe" venture. Sin is white northern congregations wondering why blacks will not come to their churches, and white southern churches fearing that blacks might come. In a word, sin is whiteness—the desire of whites to play God in the realm of human affairs.

What does sin mean for blacks? Again, we must be reminded that sin is a community concept, and this means that only blacks can talk about their sin. Oppressors are not only rendered incapable of knowing their own condition, they cannot speak about or for the oppressed. This means that whites are not permitted to speak about what blacks have done to contribute to their condition. They cannot call blacks Uncle Toms; only members of the black community can do that. For whites, to do so is not merely insensitivity—it is blasphemy!

Whites cannot know us; they do not even know themselves. If we could just get "concerned" whites to recognize this fact, then we blacks could get about the business of cleaning up this society and destroying the filthy manifestations of whiteness in it.

If we are to understand sin and what it means to blacks, it is necessary to be black and also a participant in the black liberation struggle. Because sin represents the condition of estrangement from the source of one's being, for blacks this means a desire to be white. It is the refusal to be what we are. Sin, then, for blacks is loss of identity. It is saying yes to the white absurdity—accepting the world as it is by letting whites define black existence. To be in sin is to be contented with white solutions for the "black problem" and not rebel against every infringement of white being on black being.

We blacks know what that means because for too long we have let whites determine the shape of the future and what the limits are. We have reinforced white values by letting whites define what is good and beautiful. But now we are being born anew; our community is being redeemed. This is so because we are perceiving the true nature of black existence. The black theology analysis of this change focuses on Jesus as the black Christ. To this we now turn in the next chapter.